

Volunteered to harms way

Pearl survivor gets chance to "settle score"



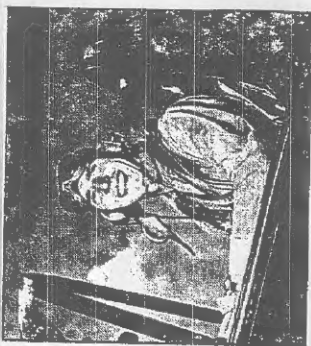
Mortally wounded, the ship was rolling to port. Pushing through the small porthole the sailor splashed into the water and its silence below. But the need for air sent him tacking to the top. At the surface he found two inches of oil. Shaking his head violently, he attempted to clear his vision of water and black oil. Looking around, while struggling to tread water, he saw total devastation, most of the ships burning, many settling or rolling to their sides. Even the water seemed on fire as oil burned at its surface. Fire seemed to be spreading. Seeing a boat launch nearby moving slowly, pulling survivors from the water, he started toward it but found another sailor struggling. Despite the difficulty of keeping himself afloat, he grabbed the man and took him in tow, moving as best he could toward the approaching boat. The sounds of exploding ships, guns firing, and screaming aircraft overhead were deafening. Besides bombing the aircraft were strafing. He'd been spotted and the small launch moved alongside and friendly hands reached down. When the lifesaving sailor shouted for the men aboard to first take the man he'd taken in tow, he was informed that he was dead. Part of his head was missing. He was told to release the body, they were already overloaded.

More than anything, this sailor had wanted to be a naval aviator. He wanted to fly. But he was enlisted. And, aviators in the Navy were officers with college degrees. To prepare for his goal, he'd already earned a pilot's license during off-duty hours at his own expense. As a Navy radioman he'd qualified to fly the back-seat of battleship observation planes. These aircraft were used by the big ships in gun-spotting as well as search and rescue.

While serving aboard the battleship, USS Colorado, a request came from the USS Oklahoma for an air qualified radioman, and as his ship had more than its quota of airborne second-seaters, he'd volunteered for the assignment. Transported by troop carrier from the Bremerton Ship Yard in Washington State, he would join the ship at Pearl Harbor. After reporting aboard the battleship, he was assigned a bunk and met some of his shipmates that he'd be working with in the communications department.

After settling in and stowing his "gear," the sailor started off to find a friend who was serving aboard the ship, but was disappointed to find that he was ashore on weekend liberty and would not return until the next day. Turning in early that evening, he slept well then rose early for breakfast. Finishing "chow," he made his way back to quarters.

In the windowless compartment, he was offered a newspaper, "The Honolulu Star," and settled back to read. At five minutes to eight, just before morning colors would be held to the sound of The National Anthem, he felt a thud and the ship shuddered. Those standing were knocked from their feet and sent sprawling on the steel deck. It was at this time a startling announcement came over the public address system. "This is a real Jap air attack, and no shit." It was December 7, 1941, and the Japanese were attacking Hawaii.



Lieutenant "Spider" Webb in the cockpit of his F-6 Grumman "Hellcat."

Over 2,400 Americans died, more than 1,000 were wounded. Enemy losses were about 64. The balance sheet didn't balance. We'd been knocked down, but fortunately, we hadn't been knocked out. This fleet, that at the moment seem buried, would rise... as if from the dead. Their crews, some old, some new, would set about on a mission of vengeance. A mission that would culminate in the unconditional surrender of the Japanese on August 15, 1945.

And the sailor who survived at Pearl - he went on to fly for the Navy. Wilbur Blucher "Spider" Webb was ordered to flight school in August 1942. At Naval Air Station, Pensacola, Fla., Webb completed fighter training then reported to the USS Hornet.

While flying an F-6F "Hellcat" he would be credited with downing six enemy aircraft in one day (actually eight). Webb would participate in all major aerial action from the Hornet as part of Task Force 58 in

All men in the tiny compartment headed for the "hatch," and escape. Another thud, and again everyone was knocked from their feet. Suddenly the ship listed to port with still another thud. As this was only his second day aboard the Oklahoma, the sailor decided to stay with one of the shipmates he'd befriended the night before. But suddenly in the excitement that buddy had disappeared. The order was given to abandon ship. A third explosion was experienced by the ship.

Making his way up one deck, the ship rolled to such an extent that he was actually crawling on the bulkhead (wall). Water rushed into the stricken Oklahoma. In a passageway, the sailor saw two men exit through a porthole. Another thud, the ship had taken four hits. He stripped to his shorts and moved to the small exit. Then, to the sounds of crashing equipment as it broke from its moorings, another explosion somewhere in the ship, and the screams of men, he went headlong for the porthole. With only his upper torso through the small, round widow, he became wedged at the hips. With a push and kick he was out, part of the flesh of his hips remaining on the porthole frame. After being rescued by the boat, he attached in to help with the crew pulling other sailors in the water to safety. There were over 80 men aboard a launch designed to accommodate 40. Heading back to shore on Ford Island, a Japanese "Val" dive bomber strafed the unnamed boat killing two sailors.

On the landing they unloaded the wounded and dead. They remained there on a dock. No ambulances or vehicles were available to take them anywhere, besides there was no hospital.

From the shore he looked out at the cargo that had been Pearl Harbor. A harbor at held the might of the U.S. Navy. In a single, infamous stroke of daring, the Pacific had ceased to exist. But they'd missed the carriers. They were still at sea on maneuvers. The sailor turned and looked at men who lay on the landing or wandered out in shock. For a world war, they were young, inexperienced, and untried. This day would provide maturity and resolve.

the Pacific during 1944, most of which involved air to ground missions destroying enemy aircraft on the ground. He would also be credited with assists in shooting down a "Betty" Bomber and a four-engine Kawanishi seaplane, as well as for sinking a 500-ton Japanese supply ship. His seventh and final air victory came during air strikes over the Philippines when he encountered an advanced enemy fighter, the Japanese Tony.

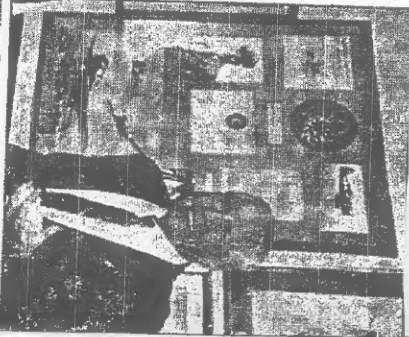
When Fighting Squadron Two retired from the Pacific, it had "chalked up" 261 victories with 245 planes destroyed on the ground.

Spider resigned his commission in 1946, to return to an enlisted status as a Chief Aviation Pilot and joined the Training and Administration of the Reserve (TAR) program at NAS Dallas. In 1958, he was named the most decorated Navy enlisted during World War II. He had earned 28 awards, some of which include the Navy Cross, two Distinguished Flying Crosses, nine Air Medals, two Personal Commendation Medals, and the Presidential Unit Citation. Spider retired from the Navy at NAS Dallas in November 1958, at the highest rank held, Navy lieutenant.

After Whittier Butcher "Spider" Webb poses before completing his naval career, Spider would be employed by Ling-Temco-Vought as a weapons control instructor for 15 years. He also spent five years in the mid-east with the Saudi Air Force as an instructor with Northrop.

Webb is married to Clio Ruth Pace, originally from Wichita Falls. They live in North Richland Hills. The Webbs have a son and daughter, and three grandchildren.

Article by Walter Wogener and "Spider" Webb. ²³



Whittier Butcher "Spider" Webb poses before the display created by the Lone Star Flight Museum in Galveston, Tex. He was inducted into the museum in January 1994. Other pilots with displays in the museum include Eddie Rickenbacker, "Gunny" Boyd, Joe Loss, "Jimmy" Doolittle, Paul Tibbets, Chuck Yeager and many more. ²⁴